VISIT…

BFI FILM CLASSICS

SUNRISE

A SONG OF TWO HUMANS

Lucy Fischer

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'SUNRISE': BORDER CROSSINGS

> Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology. In this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity ... of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.
>
> Marshall Berman (15)

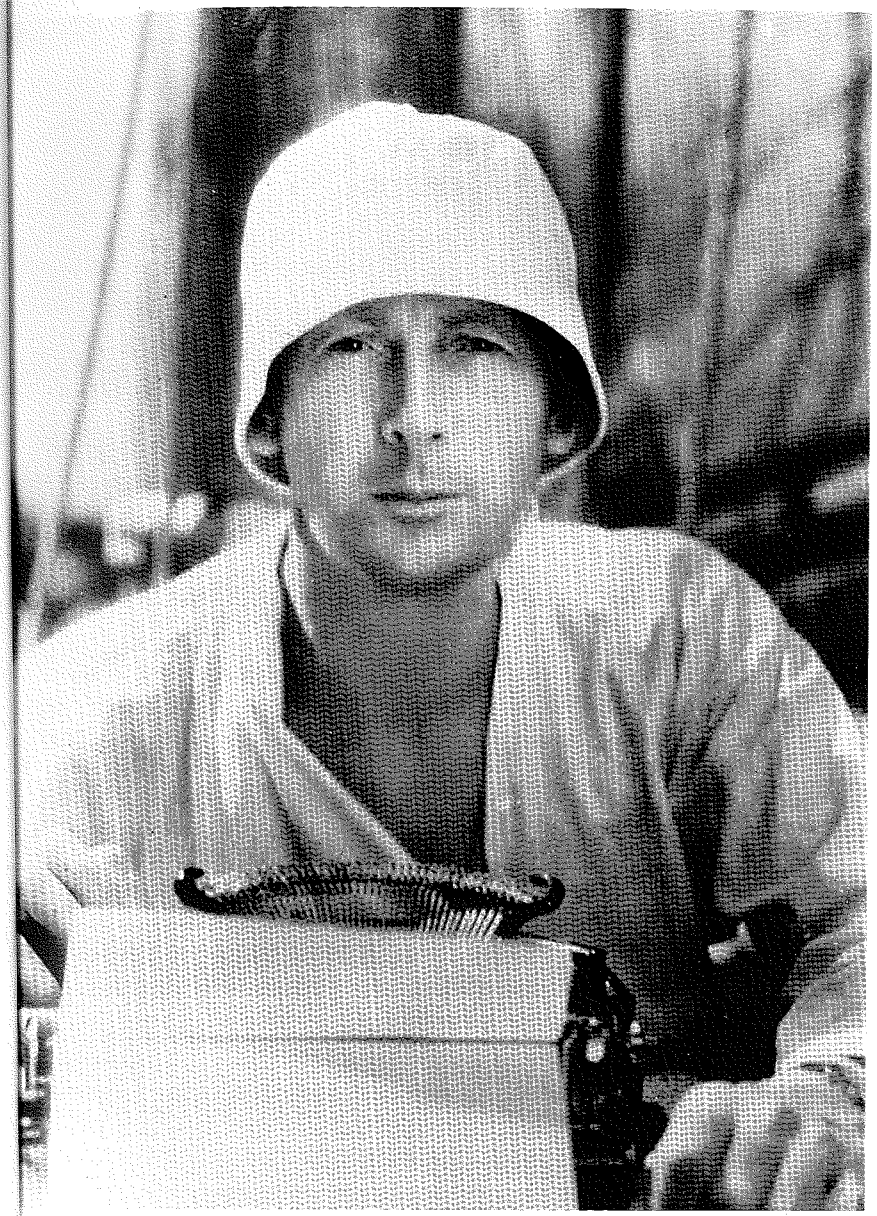
In the quote above, Berman conceives modernity as entailing two major features: a lack of boundaries and a wealth of contradictions. As an exemplary modern text, it should not come as a surprise that such elements profoundly structure *Sunrise* (1927).

For Nestor Almendros, *Sunrise* is 'a dialectical movie'. Similarly, for Tony Rayns, its 'meaning springs largely from [its] oppositions' (92).[1] For Dorothy Jones, it 'communicate[s] by establishing significant contrasts' (255). While these critical views highlight the film's antitheses (a trope that Berman associates with modernity), they stress separation at the expense of continuity (or 'disunity' at the expense of 'unity'). Rather than embrace fixed divisions, *Sunrise* is a text marked by fluid boundaries – junctions that trace the subtle connection between entities rather than their clear demarcation. It is this complex mode of 'border crossing' (this world of 'Both/And' – not – 'Either/Or' [Berman, 24]) that makes the film so poignant, resonant, fascinating and modern.

EUROPE/AMERICA

> As contemporary critics observed, Murnau had made neither an 'American' nor a 'Continental' film, but something with a deliberately 'universal' quality that mediated between the two.
>
> Graham Petrie (41)

In July 1926, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (1888–1931) travelled from Germany to the United States – traversing national and continental perimeters – to make *Sunrise* for the Fox Film Corporation in Hollywood (Eisner, 167). Born F.W. Plumpe in Bielefeld, Westphalia, he adopted the name of Murnau after a small Bavarian town famous for its



F.W. Murnau

artists colony, the Blaue Reiter group. As a student he studied literature and art history at the University of Heidelberg (Eisner, 13, 17). Since childhood, Murnau had displayed an interest in the theatre, and, as a young man, had acted in numerous productions. When Max Reinhardt observed Murnau perform, he invited him to join his Deutsches Theatre. Murnau's stage career was briefly interrupted by infantry service in World War I, but he returned to Berlin and, along with others from the Reinhardt school (among them Conrad Veidt), devoted himself to the cinema – founding the Murnau Veidt Filmgesellschaft (Eisner, 23).

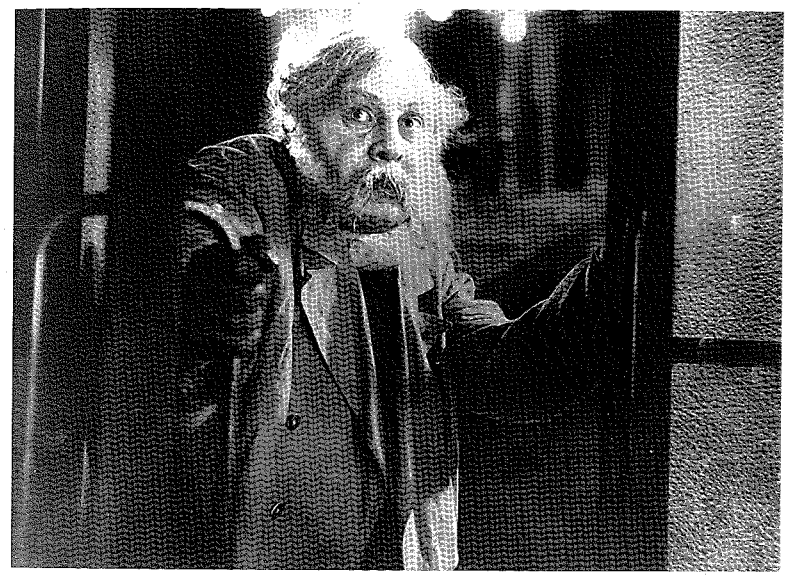
Between 1919 and 1923, Murnau directed some fourteen films, most of which have been lost. Especially noteworthy is *Nosferatu* (1922), his brilliant adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* – a film which many have seen as presaging *Sunrise* in its fascination with 'perverse' love (Wood, 16). With *Der Letzte Mann* (1924), Murnau achieved international fame and became renowned for his use of camera movement. When the film opened in the United States as *The Last Laugh*, it enjoyed great critical success.

Hailed in America as the 'German genius', Murnau caught the attention of William Fox who was seeking to lend art-house prestige to his studio in the mid-20s. Negotiations with Murnau began in 1924 and contracts were signed in 1925 (Everson, 318, 321). As Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery note, the decision to produce *Sunrise* was 'a fortuitous historical accident by which the resources of Hollywood were put, for once, at the service of a great film artist' (91).

Of course, Murnau's success should be seen as part of a broader context – that is the international cachet of German cinema in the silent era. Such directors as Ernst Lubitsch, Fritz Lang, Ludwig Berger, Paul Leni, and E.A. Dupont had already made their mark on American cinema, and films like *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1919), *Passion* (1919), *The Golem* (1920) and *Siegfried* (1924), had achieved acclaim. According to Allen and Gomery, Fox Studios signed Murnau in order 'to demonstrate that they were more than venders of entertainment for the masses but were also patrons of the highest cinematic art' (99). Since *The Last Laugh* had been a commercial failure in the United States, Fox could have had no delusions that Murnau would be a box-office winner.

Murnau was given almost unprecedented freedom and control over his first project for Fox – a film titled *Sunrise* to be based on a story

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919)



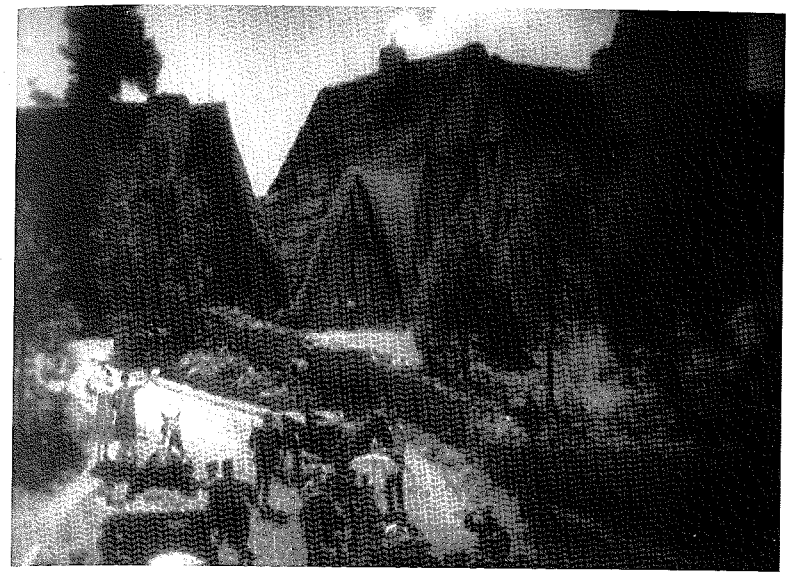
The Last Laugh (1924)

by Hermann Sudermann. In addition to his drawing on a German literary source, Murnau employed a host of European colleagues for the project. His scenarist was Carl Mayer (1894–1944), an Austrian writer who collaborated with Murnau on seven films over the course of his career, including *The Last Laugh*. With Mayer, came the legacy of German Expressionism: he had co-authored the script for *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. Some claim that Mayer was also influential in bringing camera movement to Murnau's work, and in valorising a purely visual (almost title-less) form of silent cinema (Desilets, 6–7). Rather than travel to Hollywood, Mayer remained in Germany to write the treatment for *Sunrise*, which modified Sudermann's story about a married farmer who becomes involved in an obsessive, adulterous affair.

The set designer for *Sunrise*, Rochus Gliese (1891–1978), was also German, but, unlike Mayer, he accompanied Murnau to Hollywood. Gliese had worked on three of Murnau's previous films (*Der Brennende Acker* [*The Burning Earth*, 1922]; *Die Austreilbung* [*The Expulsion*, 1923]; and *Die Fananzen des Grossherhozgs* [*The Finances of the Grand Duke*, 1923]), as well as on Paul Wegener's Expressionist classic, *The Golem*. Gliese's work was central to the visual effect and aesthetics of *Sunrise*, and the film immediately became known for its grand, ambitious and expensive *mise en scène*. (Mordaunt Hall, in his *New York Times* review, referred to *Sunrise* as costing 'a staggering sum of money'.) Especially noteworthy was the elaborate artificial city Gliese created for the farm couple's visit to town, as well as the scenery they passed on their way there during a trolley ride. Eisner quotes an Austrian journalist who wrote:

> Only what was strictly necessary was constructed, and the sets never went beyond what the camera itself required. Everything was built in terms of the camera lens, using ... *trompe l'œil*. (Eisner, 180)

Gliese was also responsible for constructing a simulated rural village by the shores of Lake Arrowhead, California to serve as the farm couple's community. Though the locale of *Sunrise* is left vague (the intertitles explain that it is 'no place' and 'every place'), to Eisner, the village 'looks completely German', with The Wife (Janet Gaynor, 1906–84) 'a sort of German Gretchen' (176, 183). As for the city, Petrie observes that, though it is 'furnished with shop signs in English, [it] is not recognisably



The village where The Man and The Wife live

City view: opening montage

American in architecture' (41). Likewise, Everson finds the setting of *Sunrise* 'ambiguous' and filled with elements that 'suggest Europe' (324). The result is a kind of 'no man's land', or, as Petrie describes it, a world that is 'exotic without being totally alien' (41).

Gliese also brought to the look of *Sunrise* an Expressionist use of 'forced perspective'. This means that objects in the foreground of the frame are sometimes unusually large, making the background recede in an exaggerated manner (for example, the *mise en scène* of the farm house in which the Woman from the City resides). Similarly, to heighten the sense of artificiality, Gliese 'combined life-size structures (and people) with scale models, sloping floors, dwarfs and dolls' (Desilets, 27). One of the most dazzling instances of this technique occurs in the opening montage of the film which entails a modernist, graphic representation of summer vacation time, with images of people leaving the city. As Eisner states:

> For this quite short sequence Gliese made a model for the camera about 20 yards high, overlooking the square. In front of this 'tower' he suspended two model train rails in such a way that, between them, the camera could photograph two platforms with passengers. (172, note)

Due in large part to Gliese's superb work on the film, *Sunrise* received a special Academy Award for 'Artistic Quality of Production' (Desilets, 28).

One of the cameramen on *Sunrise*, Charles Rosher (1885–1974), was an Englishman who had worked in Hollywood since the early days. By the time Rosher met Murnau, the cinematographer had worked with Cecil B. DeMille and was Mary Pickford's chief cameraman and publicity photographer. Rosher's first professional contact with Murnau was when the cameraman spent a year in residence at the Ufa studios in Berlin, serving as a consultant on Murnau's last European film, *Faust* (1925). Since Murnau knew that he was about to start work in the States, he asked Rosher's advice about how scenes were shot in Hollywood. For his part, Rosher claims to have learnt a great deal from *Faust*'s German cameraman, Carl Hoffman: 'I took several ideas back, including a dolly suspended from railway tracks in the ceiling which I adapted for *Sunrise*' (Desilets, 29–30). Both Rosher and the other cameraman on *Sunrise*,

Karl Struss, received the first Academy Award for Cinematography in honour of their work.

The American, Karl Struss (1891–1981) began his career studying photography at Columbia University, and later became a member of Alfred Stieglitz's Photo-Secession group. After publishing in such magazines as *Camera Work*, *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair* and *Harper's Bazaar*, he moved to Hollywood, where he did portraiture for celebrities, including Cecil B. DeMille and Gloria Swanson. He then worked as a cinematographer on such films as *Ben-Hur* (1925) and *Sparrows* (1926). It was on the latter film that he first worked with Rosher, who later engaged him for *Sunrise* (Desilets, 51–2).

Aside from its transcontinental crew and its European visual tropes, the narrative of *Sunrise* bears traces of German Expressionism. On the one hand, the film seems consonant with American traditions of melodrama (the story's focus on domestic life, its prurient concern with adultery, its quasi-Manichaean structure of good versus evil, its valorisation of female innocence). However, on the other hand, *Sunrise* transcends its standard melodramatic roots and veers toward a more eccentric style.

As Robin Wood explains: 'Expressionism in the German cinema was more than a style; it was an atmosphere and an ethos' (9). For Wood, the Expressionism of *Sunrise* lies in its 'oppressive sense of doom or fate, and an obsessive association of sensuality with evil' (9). Similarly, Thomas Elsaesser finds an Expressionist touch in 'the often tormented psychology of [Murnau's] characters' (35). Extending this focus on interiority, Molly Haskell finds *Sunrise* consonant with *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*'s 'theme ... of the implicit continuity between conscious and unconscious forces, mediated by instinct' (405).

For Eisner, Murnau's Expressionism is also apparent in his handling of the actors. In particular, the director's coaching of George O'Brien (1900–85) – who plays the farmer (The Man) – was notorious for Murnau's insistence that the actor wear lead weights in his shoes during the first part of the film (including the scenes in the marshes where he meets his paramour, the Woman from the City [Margaret Livingston]; and his failed attempt to drown his wife [Wood, 12]). This strategy gave O'Brien a slow, lumbering, gait that connoted monstrosity. Referring to O'Brien's slouched posture, Eisner claims that Murnau taught him to 'act with his back' (183). Disparaging such Expressionist

16 Murnau and Charles Rosher

The Man lunges towards his Wife on the boat

George O'Brien 'acts with his back'

touches, one reviewer named O'Brien 'Golem's little boy' ('The Shadow Stage', 52).

Jo Leslie Collier sees Murnau's style as marked by German Romanticism as well as by Expressionism, thus supporting Fieschi's sense of the film's 'strategic refusal to let itself be defined by any particular aesthetic dogma' (Fieschi, 704). As Collier notes: 'the cycle of anti-realistic-romantic theatrical expression which had its roots in Richard Wagner ultimately reached its peak in the work of Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau' (5). In particular, she sees *Sunrise* as a 'remake' of Wagner's *Tannhauser* (122). Among the 'tenets of romanticism' that Collier finds prominent in Murnau's work are 'a concern with the individual, not the social group; ... a special emphasis on Nature; ... an opposition between Nature and Culture; ... a fondness of ... the earthy peasant and the noble savage; ... the idealization of Woman; and ... most particularly ... the privileged place afforded to emotions' (105).

What is clear from the American critical reception of *Sunrise* is how the film tapped into a debate about cinema and culture. *Variety* called it 'a distinguished contribution to the screen, made in this country, but produced after the best manner of the German school' (Rush, 21); the *Literary Digest* deemed *Sunrise* 'art ... with a big A' ('*Sunrise*', Dec 1927; 1); Mordaunt Hall declared Murnau 'an artist in camera studies' and his film an 'exotic ... mixture of Russian gloom and Berlin brightness'.

By the time Murnau started work on *Sunrise*, however, a critical backlash had begun against German imports and émigrés working in the film industry. Some European directors were regarded as temperamental, extravagant 'prima donnas' and European influences were seen as 'strange' rather than innovative (Lipkin, 344; Allen and Gomery, 100–1). Petrie quotes Welford Beaton of the *Film Spectator* as stating that, 'Murnau's direction reflects Germanic arrogance' (Petrie, 47). Similarly, a *Photoplay* critic saw *Sunrise* as '[t]he sort of picture that fools high-brows into hollering "Art!" – full of ... trick photography and fancy effects,' but having 'no story interest and only stilted, mannered acting'. The reviewer concludes that 'F.W. Murnau ... could learn a lot about story-telling from local talent' ('The Shadow Stage', 52). Disagreeing with this position, Matthew Josephson of *Motion Picture Classic* decried such chauvinistic sentiments which 'grumble[d] at the inroads of foreign film stars and directors'.

In *Sunrise*, Murnau produced a work in which American and European sensibilities blend rather than clash. As Tony Rayns has remarked, it is an 'almost miraculous fusion of American and European ideals' (93). Using a metaphor that draws on the centrality of the couple in Murnau's work, Haskell notes that, '*Sunrise* becomes the lyrical culmination of a strain of German Expressionism that, [is] *married* to American technology' (404, my italics).

FILM/LITERATURE

> [Sudermann's stories] were full of dramatic suspense, good roles and a bourgeois outlook, abounded in realistic details, and rendered the melancholy of East Prussian landscape painstakingly – qualities which made them attractive to film producers for many years to come.
>
> Siegfried Kracauer (quoted in Desilets, 11)

While disputes continued about the 'auteur' status of European film directors, what wasn't in doubt was the standing of the author of the literary source for *Sunrise*, who was widely known as a novelist and playwright. *Sunrise* is based on the story 'The Excursion to Tilsit' ('Die Reise nach Tilsit'),which was included in Sudermann's 1917 collection, *Lithuanian Tales* (*Litauische Geschichten*). The anthology was published in the United States in 1930 by Horace Liveright, with a translation by Lewis Galantiere.

It is interesting to examine the continuities and disjunctions traced by the adaptation of the piece from prose to cinema. Whereas the setting of *Sunrise* is indefinite, in Sudermann's story it is clear: the town of Wilwischken, a small but prosperous Lithuanian fishing village. As in *Sunrise*, the book's narrative involves an adulterous triangle; but in the book the participants are all members of the local, rural community: the fisherman (Ansas Balezus), his wife (Indra) and their maid (Busza), there is no urban outsider. None the less, when Ansas and Indra travel to Tilsit, ethnic divisions are shown to exist between the German residents of the city, the Russians that Ansas and Indra pass on the river, and the rustic village couple themselves.

Some of the scenes in *Sunrise* are directly inspired by Sudermann's story. The memorable walk of The Man through the marshes to meet and conspire with the City Woman, seems to arise from the following passage:

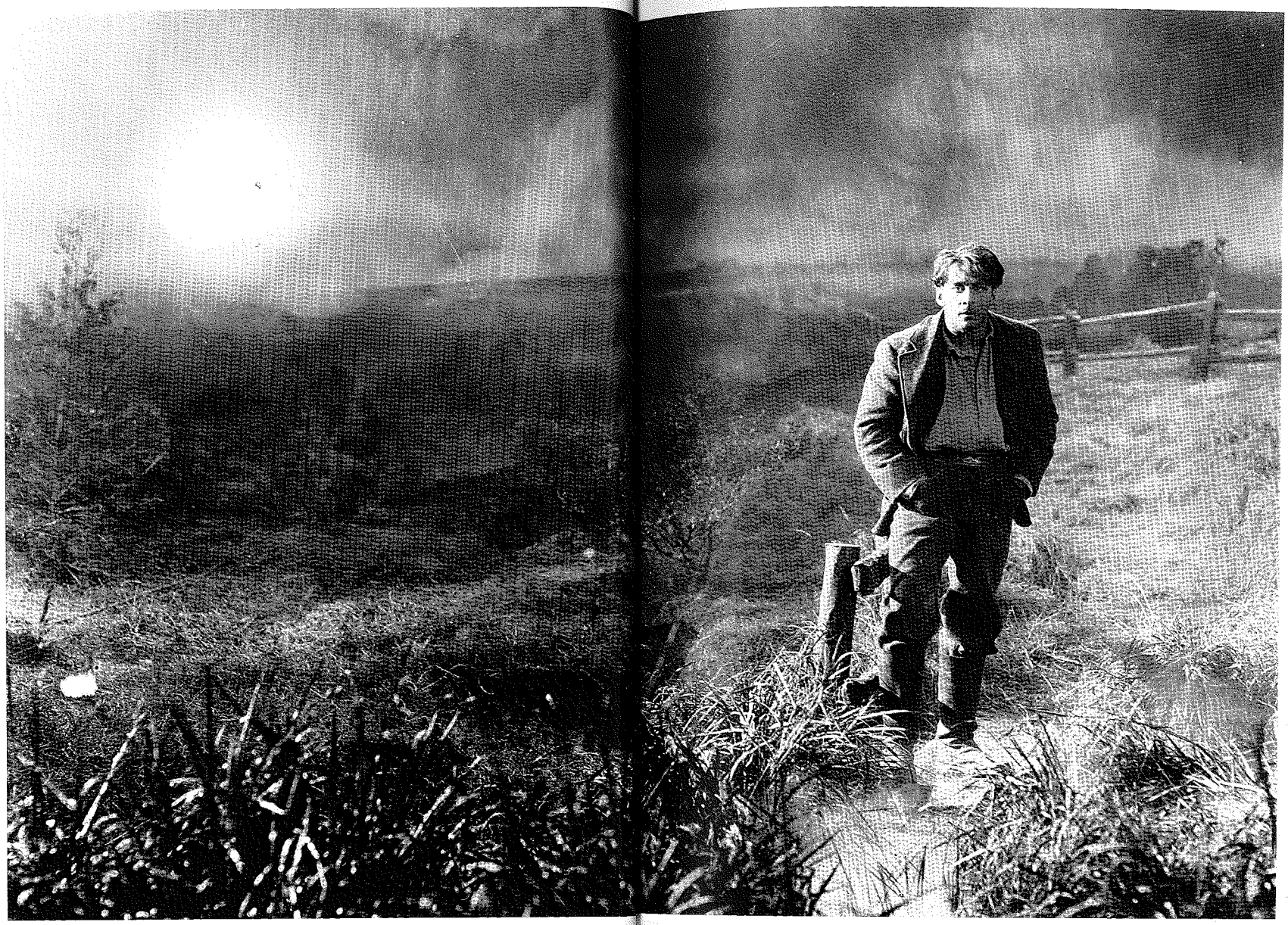
> And where did Ansas go when night fell? No one knew. He wandered along the Parva [River] where the willow shoots were so thick that none of the glow of evening penetrated to the water. ... There, where none of the glow of evening reached the water, they [Ansas and Busza] would sit far into the night and make their plans for the future. But however pleasant they might imagine it to be, Indra, his wife stood always in the way. (Sudermann, 11–12)

Similarly, the day/night iconography that structures *Sunrise* is present in Sudermann's text. Indra is described as 'pale as a daughter of the sun' (4), and when she and Ansas sail home from Tilsit, 'moonbeams lay ... brightly on the water' (43). As in the film, day and night have symbolic/psychic overtones. While the couple's morning trip to the city is fraught with the threat of violence, their nighttime return is peaceful and romantic. As Indra ironically muses that evening: 'now it is day, and then it was night' (41).

In the way that *Sunrise* makes comparisons between 'Now' and 'Then' (the couple's present rancour versus their idyllic past), so the short story invokes nostalgic recollection. Early on in the tale, 'Indra remembered with sadness what a splendid husband she had had before Busza came into their home' (6); and later, her 'thoughts [go] back to a spring day seven years before' when she was joyful and pregnant with their first child (22).

In addition to having the rural couple travel to the city (a progression which *Sunrise* retains), the short story focuses on sites such as the café and amusement park – both of which are central to the film's *mise en scène*. Sudermann describes Indra's thrill on riding a carousel as: 'The whole world had finally become a wheel, and the sky galloped backwards around them like a fiery top. ... Life can be so beautiful when one is in love and riding on the merry-go-round!' (39).

There are, however, numerous ways in which Sudermann's story differs from Murnau's film. First, there is the more traditional religious tone of the book, with its comparison of Indra to the Madonna, and



22 The Man approaches the moonlit marshes at night

broad references to celestial spheres: when the couple listens to music in Tilsit, it is 'like being wafted to heaven' (33). Primary in Sudermann's text, is a discourse of sin and forgiveness. During the couple's sail home, Indra convinces Ansas to ask God for exoneration from his adulterous/murderous impulses: 'confess now and we will pray together' (42).

Perhaps the greatest alteration from Sudermann's version is in the psychic dynamic of the story and its denouement. In *Sunrise*, The Wife is largely unaware of her husband's scheme to drown her; in the story, Indra is fully cognisant. She goes on the boat trip to Tilsit as a kind of suicidal gesture, passively accepting her fate. Before leaving, 'she laid out her shroud and whatever else she would be wearing in her coffin ... [a]nd ... made ready for the excursion' (18). In the boat, she wonders:

> how was she to know when the terrible thing was about to happen so that she might have time to plead with him? It might happen at any moment. ... 'The best way,' she thought, 'is to let come what will and use the time to make my peace with the Lord'. (24)

Though Indra eventually confronts Ansas with his crime, and the two miraculously reconcile (as they do in *Sunrise*), the short story does not end on a propitious note. A storm plagues the couple's journey home in the movie, whereas in the story catastrophe is caused by their unwise decision to celebrate and drink liquor – an act which leads to their dozing off and the boat capsizing. As in *Sunrise*, the bull rushes that Ansas had brought to save himself, he gives to his wife. But, while both survive in the film, in the story, Ansas drowns – a wrenching twist of fate. While some have seen the happy ending of *Sunrise* as a concession to Hollywood (Jacobs, 362), others have rejected this view, citing the extraordinary control and autonomy which Murnau enjoyed on the production (Wood, 16; Jones, 258).

Like the film which it would inspire, 'The Excursion to Tilsit' is a complex text from which one must peel away numerous layers. Perhaps Sudermann hints at this process in his choice of agricultural imagery in the tale, for, he makes a point of telling us: 'The onions of Wilwischken are renowned' (3).

Awakening. The Man recalls his murderous plans

The Man and his Wife in stunned silence on the trolley

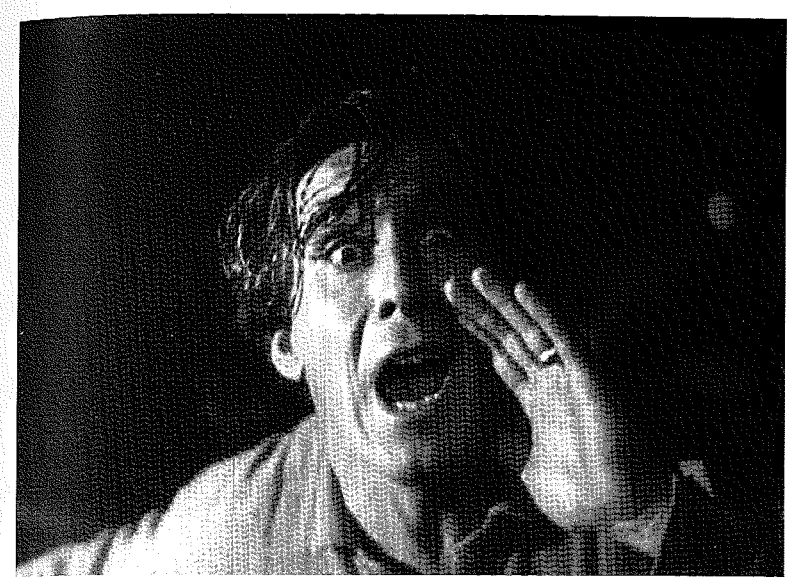
The boat trip

SILENCE/SOUND

> One would hesitate to call *any* film the finest of its era, though as a climax to the silent film, one could certainly defend the statement if it were applied to *Sunrise*.
>
> William K. Everson (324)

In the same way that *Sunrise* is an uncommon mix of literature and film, of American melodrama and European avant-garde, it also occupies a peculiar median position between silence and sound, making it 'a curious technological hybrid' (Allen and Gomery, 92). Although experimentation with film sound had been one of the key challenges since the days of the primitive cinema (when Thomas Alva Edison conceived the Kinetoscope as an extension of his phonograph), commercial sound exhibition had been deterred by problems with synchronisation and amplification. These difficulties were by and large solved by the mid-20s, when various studios adopted competing (and incompatible) methods of sound reproductin. Warner Bros. embraced Vitaphone, a sound-on-disc system, and, in 1926, released a series of short films using this technology. In 1927 (only a few days after the opening of *Sunrise* [Lipkin, 349]), Warner Bros. created history with the premiere of *The Jazz Singer*, a 'part-talkie', and again in 1928 with the production of an 'all-talkie', *The Lights of New York*. Fox, on the other hand, who had more technological foresight, utilised Movietone, a sound-on-film system – the system that eventually won out over the others. In 1927, it released a series of newsreels as well as *Sunrise*, which was shot as a silent film but synchronised with a musical score for distribution (Thompson and Bordwell, 213–15). Ironically, the graphic illustration that graced the programme for the film's showing at the Cathay Circle theatre in Los Angles, depicted Gaynor and O'Brien framed in the centre of a sun that resembled the hole of a sound-on-disc recording.[2]

Sunrise is regarded as an unsurpassed work of early cinema. (Even the Cathay Circle programme referred to it as the 'Astounding Fox Film Picture Which Has Amazed New York'.) Among later critics, not only Everson but Almendros gran it classic status, with the latter describing it as the 'peak of the genre' (30). Similarly, Fieschi describes it as 'a summation' and 'a point of perfection in the silent cinema' (706). The



The Man calls out to his Wife from the rocks

The City Woman in *femme fatale* pose

film's exemplary nature is apparent on numerous levels. While aspects of its acting style are influenced by Expressionism, other elements belong to the broader history of gestural pantomime perfected by D.W. Griffith. For example, when The Man awakes on the day he will sail to town, he presses his hands to his temples, horrified to recollect his murderous plot against his wife. And the sequence in which the couple leaves the farm by boat: The Wife has momentary doubts about The Man's intentions; she stands up in the boat (as though to escape) – a look of concern crosses her face – she then sits down again, calm having returned to her visage. Her thought process is entirely legible in both her movements and countenance. Later on, after The Man has almost killed her, and she has fled to shore, the two ride silently together on a trolley – with him attempting to catch her attention, and with her avoiding his eyes. In this and the sequences that follow, their entire relationship is dramatised through a discourse of returned and averted gazes.

In addition, there is a sense of character stereotype in *Sunrise* indicative of silent film technique, which delineated persona without the benefit of speech. As Claire Johnston notes (in discussing the theories of Erwin Panofsky):

> in the early cinema the audience had much difficulty deciphering what appeared on the screen. Fixed iconography, then, was introduced to aid understanding and provide the audience with basic facts with which to comprehend the narrative. (408)

It is no surprise, then, that the leading characters in *Sunrise* are noted only as 'The Woman from the City', 'The Man', and 'The Wife' – labels which emphasise their broad, universal qualities. Furthermore, the Woman from the City's nature is registered in visible clues such as her décolleté black dress, cigarettes, and make-up.

The graceful camera movement for which *Sunrise* is celebrated (for example, the tracking shot through the marshes, the ride on the trolley) is a clear signature of the silent era since, with the coming of sound, cameras were often trapped in soundproofed 'iceboxes', unable to move (at least, during synchronised dialogue sequences). On the other hand, with its highly effective and experimental score (composed by Hugo Riesenfeld), *Sunrise* is also a noteworthy work of the early sound period. Few who have seen the film can forget the musical

sequences: for example, the foreboding, repetitive theme (consisting largely of two alternating, ominous notes) that accompanies The Man's walk through the marshes to meet his lover; the raucous jazz motif (with noise and voice effects) that conjoins the city sequence; the rippling melody (with wind sounds) that marks the episode of the couple's sail home in a storm; the church bells that ring at the exact moment The Man decides to spare his wife. But perhaps the most extraordinary instance of 'sound' in the film is one which is precisely synchronised to the human voice but without recourse to speech. After the boat has capsized and The Man awakes by the rocks, he realises that his wife is not beside him and desperately calls out to her in the darkness. As he cups his hand to his mouth, we hear a plaintive series of notes on the French horn that approximate his cry. This strategy is used on numerous other occasions to signify his call or that of others during the search and rescue operation. It is, in fact, suggested in Sudermann's story in which on the morning after the couple's shipwreck, 'A voice, a woman's voice, was calling for help through the fog' (48).

Because of the success of Riesenfeld's score, it is hard to imagine *Sunrise* conjoined with any other accompaniment. Yet, as part of the

The Jazz Singer (1927)

1989 Sundance Film Festival, a new composition (written by David Newman) accompanied the exhibition of the film and was performed again in 1992 by the Los Angeles Pops Orchestra (Farber, 48).

While the film's bold straddling of silence and sound is intriguing, its release was not a commercial success. As Allen and Gomery note: 'Poorly promoted, released amidst the hoopla of *The Jazz Singer* and misteamed with Fox's Movietone newsreel, *Sunrise* had no chance at the box office.' As Fox's most expensive silent film, it failed to recoup its costs (Allen and Gomery, 91, 103). Significantly, Haskell reads its narrative (with its shift from country to town) as allegorical of changes in cinema history: 'Murnau's city often seems like a metaphor for the sound film, trying to burst into the peaceful haven of the country, the silent film' (406).

CITY/COUNTRY

> 'Country' and 'city' are very powerful words, and this is not surprising when we remember how much they seem to stand for in the experience of human communities.
>
> Raymond Williams (1)

In recent years, so-called 'eco-critics' have brought attention to the issue of *locale* in film narrative. As Lawrence Buell has stated: 'We've gotten used to character, theme and plot; it's the sense of place that is ignored or slighted' (quoted in Parini, 52). Raymond Williams argues that, within this 'scenic' discourse, the dichotomy of urban versus rural is one that fundamentally organises human existence.

The drama of *Sunrise* is structured around this kind of tension (Belton, 131–2). The Man is seduced by a vacationing woman from the city who urges him to sell his farm and join her in the metropolis. In one scene, we see her circling a newspaper advertisement for purchasing agricultural land; and in another, we learn that The Man has mortgaged his farm to sustain their illicit affair.

Some critics have seen Murnau as drawing on schematic and familiar notions of the two locales. Petrie writes of *Sunrise* as dealing in 'moral absolutes' that tap 'a traditional body of assumptions about the virtues of the countryside and the evils of the city' (43). And Wood finds

that Murnau has a 'Romantic attitude to nature', with the simple life 'being upheld against the corruption and artificiality of the City' (5). But, in truth, Murnau's drama has greater depth – resembling more Williams' ambivalent view of cultural conceptions of locale:

> On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. (Williams, 1)

It is this sense of duality and contradiction that informs Murnau's vision in *Sunrise*. Like other modern artists, he is simultaneously an 'enthusiast' and an 'enemy' of contemporary life (Berman, 24).

It is also this complexity one finds in Murnau's later film, *City Girl* (1930), a work which draws on similar themes. Rather than depict the city and country in black and white terms, Murnau portrays them in shades of grey. Initially, Chicago seems a dreary, exhausting place from which a young waitress wishes to escape, when she meets a country boy in her restaurant. When, however, she marries him and accompanies him to the farm, she faces even greater problems. His father thinks she is 'loose' and has wed his son to gain his land. Furthermore, her 'two-fisted' husband proves entirely emasculated by the patriarch. Finally, the farm hands are lascivious men, one of whom insinuates that he and the bride are having an affair. Eventually, the situation is resolved, but the country is never portrayed as paradisical.

For Williams, the rural and the urban have particular temporal configurations: 'the common image of the country is now an image of the past, and the common image of the city an image of the future' (297). This concept is linked to the phenomenon – historic and contemporary – of the migration from country to town. *Sunrise* openly embraces such a temporal formulation with the couple's idealised bucolic existence in their past, and The Man's ecstatic urban existence in his ostensible future. This discourse is imbued with nostalgia – a tone associated in the film with the flashback of the couple shown content on their farm: The Wife and child relaxing under a tree as The Man plows the land with his oxen – a scene which resembles the utopian view in traditional landscape painting.

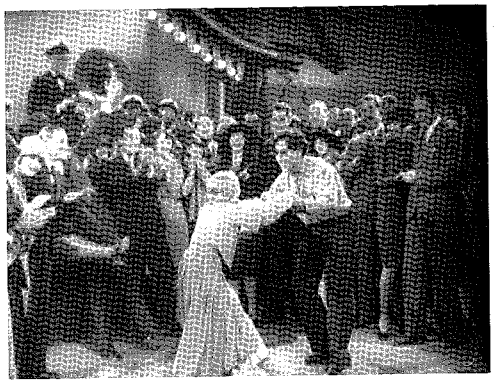
The Man and The Wife in the City

City Girl (1930) shares a similar city/country theme

The Man and The Wife photographed in the City

Flashback to happy times in a bucolic setting

The Man catches a runaway pig



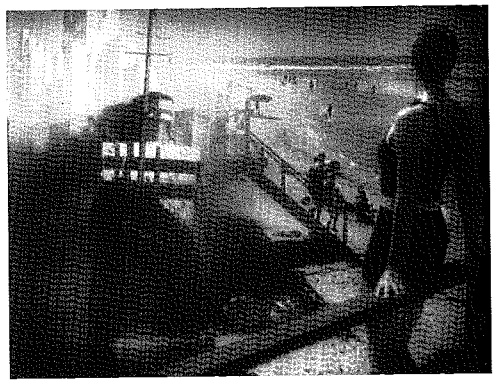
The Man and The Wife folk dance

But it is to Murnau's credit that the country is not made to seem entirely attractive or safe. Though it is clear that the sense of menace that permeates The Man's midnight walk to the marshes is related to the Woman from the City, it is also the swamp that seems dangerous in its ability to drag one down. Similarly, the picturesque lake on which the couple's village sits is, at one moment, a site for a tourist postcard, and at another, a crime scene.

While the city is tied to the figure of a seductive, home-wrecking woman -- and thereby carries considerable negative weight – it is also a site of great excitement and appeal. Janet Bergstrom regards it as highly 'sexualized', a sense heightened by Murnau's use of 'fan-like montages of jazz musicians, dancers, [and an] amusement park' (259–60). Although the Woman from the City almost destroys the couple's marriage, it is only *because* of her that The Man takes his wife to town (albeit as a ploy to murder her *en route*). It is, in fact, this trip that rejuvenates their relationship and allows it to flourish. It is as though the eroticism of the city (originally tied to the provocative visitor) now attaches itself to The Wife and transforms the couple's immature and quasi-platonic union into one which is more carnal. Many writers have remarked on Gaynor's asexual demeanour – especially at the opening of the film. Particularly noteworthy (as a sign of The Wife's repression) is the heavy matted wig that she wears – a costuming touch which drew critical scorn when the film was released. (*Photoplay* wrote that Gaynor looked 'all wrong in a blonde wig which wouldn't fool anybody' ['The Shadow Stage'].)

For Williams, 'an idea of the country is [often] an idea of childhood' (297). It is as though the city brings the couple from youth into the adult, corporeal realm. Hence, it is significant that, when they have their picture taken at the photographer's studio, they are captured stealing a kiss, like naughty teenagers.

Particularly important in Murnau's merging of the city and the country are the controversial scenes of 'comic relief' – episodes which some critics have seen as 'imposed' on Murnau and Mayer by the studio (Eisner, 183). At one point in their urban holiday, the couple frequents a fair. The Man tries his hand at a game that involves pitching a ball, which on hitting the target releases a pig down a slide. One of the animals escapes and makes his way into a restaurant, causing great dismay and panic. The Man manages to catch the swine and return it to its owner.



Opening 'vacation montage'

The city traffic magically becomes a field

The Man and the City Woman imagine the City

Recognising The Man as the hero of the evening, the restaurant band begins to play a peasant song and the couple is urged to dance. Though initially reluctant, they finally agree.

This vignette can be read in several ways. On one level, the fact that the rural couple are made a charming spectacle for the urban crowd signifies that country ways are seen as passé – the stuff of ethnographic folklore – thus validating Williams' association of the agrarian with the past. But more importantly, Murnau finds a way of blurring the distinction between city and country by bringing the rural atmosphere directly into the urban – in the form of the farm animal and the peasant dance.

Significantly, *Sunrise* is also a film which emphasises means of transportation – ways of connecting one space with another. In the opening 'vacation montage', we see images of trains and steam ships as part of an abstract collage. The trolley (which, literally, joins country to town) is also a crucial vehicle in the film – one which crosses not only geographical but psychological borders in the characters' lives. In her description of it, Eisner emphasises how one locale almost 'bleeds' into another: 'Gliese had created every kind of landscape, from fields and meadows, through an industrial area and the sparse gardens of the suburbs to the city itself' (180).

This overlapping of boundaries is made explicit in two sequences involving the couple crossing a city street. On their way into town (when their relationship is in turmoil), The Wife is almost run over by traffic, before being rescued by The Man. Toward the end of their visit, when they again traverse the street, the urban scene is transformed (through a dissolve shot) into a bucolic fantasy of them walking through a field. Though urban chaos soon returns (in the form of honking cars), the two locales have been forever fused. Rather than allow city and country to remain false polarities (in the service of cliché ideological oppositions), Murnau negotiates a rapprochement between the two. Here, Williams' words seem particularly relevant: 'we use the contrast of country and city to ratify an unresolved division and conflict of impulses, which it might be better to face in its own terms' (297).

It seems no accident that the 'special effects' described above are deployed in the city sequence. For Mary Ann Doane, the urban terrain of *Sunrise* is metaphorically connected with notions of the cinema itself.

She writes, for example, of the scene in which 'the Man and the Vamp lie on the grass and watch *the film* of the city projected against the sky' (1977: 74, my italics). She also emphasises that, while in the city, the couple visits a photography studio to have their picture taken. Thus, *Sunrise* can be viewed as a self-reflexive text which, provisionally, identifies the cinema with the metropolitan – and thereby saves that locale from any facile dismissal or devaluation.

Marshall Berman defines modernity as 'attempt[s] by modern men and women ... to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it' (5). One can view *Sunrise* precisely in those narrative terms – as the farmer and his wife journey from the Old World to the New, endeavouring to accommodate themselves to its 'possibilities and perils' (Ibid., 15).

THE MADONNA/THE WHORE

> [T]here arose [in silent cinema], identifiable by standard appearance, behaviour and attributes, the well-remembered types of the Vamp and the Straight Girl (perhaps the most convincing equivalents of the medieval personifications of the Vices and Virtues), the Family Man and the Villain. ... The conduct of the characters was predetermined accordingly.'
>
> Erwin Panofsky (in Mast, Cohen and Braudy, 240–1)

One of the major contrasts discussed in the literature on *Sunrise* is that of the farm girl versus the City Woman. The former is a familiar figure of supreme good and is associated with melodrama, whereas the latter is a nebulous figure tied to modernity.

The vamp's cinematic roots can be found in an earlier Fox film – *A Fool There Was* (1915) starring Theda Bara (Higashi, 55). (The character was later developed in films like *Blood and Sand* [1922] with Nita Naldi, and *Flesh and the Devil* [1927] starring Greta Garbo.) The vamp's force, as stereotype, tapped into societal fears of 'the pleasure-loving woman' – seen as erotic, heartless, diabolical, and supernaturally empowered (Staiger, 150, 152).

For Doane, the vamp is associated with illusionism: 'her most striking characteristic, perhaps, is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be' (1991: 1). Fittingly, Doane links her to the film medium itself; to 'new technologies of production and reproduction (photography, the cinema) born of the Industrial Revolution' (Ibid.).

The fear of the vamp, of course, stems from her propensity to destroy men – to lead them 'away from self-control toward a life of sensual expressiveness' (Staiger, 150). Her purpose in the narrative is to initiate the 'fallen man plot' – a narrative which involves the 'establishment of a secure home and family; the intervention of sexuality, which diverts the man from his family ways; his (at least financial if not social) degeneration; and then either some kind of reformation and rescue or a punishment' (Staiger, 151).

If, in the 'fallen man' scenario, the hero is eventually redeemed, it is by the nemesis of the vamp – the pious woman, often a wife and mother. As Doane notes: 'the femme fatale is represented as the antithesis of the maternal – sterile or barren, she produces nothing in a society which fetishizes production' (1991, 2). Though maternal, the good woman is often childlike, fulfilling the Victorian female ideal. As Sumiko Higashi comments:

> According to this doctrine, the woman was restricted to the private or domestic sphere while man dealt with the cash nexus in the public sphere. If woman was condemned to ignorance in a state of perpetual childhood, she nevertheless had a significant maternal function to discharge by virtue of her superior moral nature. The home, in contrast to the masculine arena of the market place, became the repository of virtue and woman its guardian. (79)

It should be clear the degree to which *Sunrise* invokes the figures of good and bad woman. In fact, the entire narrative of the film can be seen as charting the male protagonist's vacillation between the two. As Doane notes: 'The object of desire of the Man is not constant – it shifts from the City Woman to his Wife' (1977: 73).

The City Woman fits the classic model of the vamp in both her clothing and mannerisms. Since the term 'vamp' derives from the word 'vampire', it is not surprising that she resembles Murnau's Nosferatu – magically summoning The Man with her whistle, hovering over his neck as she kisses him, and slinking off at dawn when The Man is reunited with his wife. The kind of illusionism Doane associates with

vamps is, here, registered in the City Woman's engagement of masquerade (costume and make-up), her encouragement of the man's duplicity (cheating on his wife, secretly planning her demise), and her association with the 'movie' of the city which plays in The Man's mind. Obviously, *Sunrise* is also a story of a 'fallen man' – on several registers; moral, economic and psychic. In its focus on beleaguered masculinity, it once again references German cinema of the 20s, which displayed 'a certain ambivalence in male self-images and male sexuality' (Elsaesser, 38). The male character, however, is not the only figure who is conflicted in his feelings for the vamp. As Pauline Kael has indicated, so is the viewer:

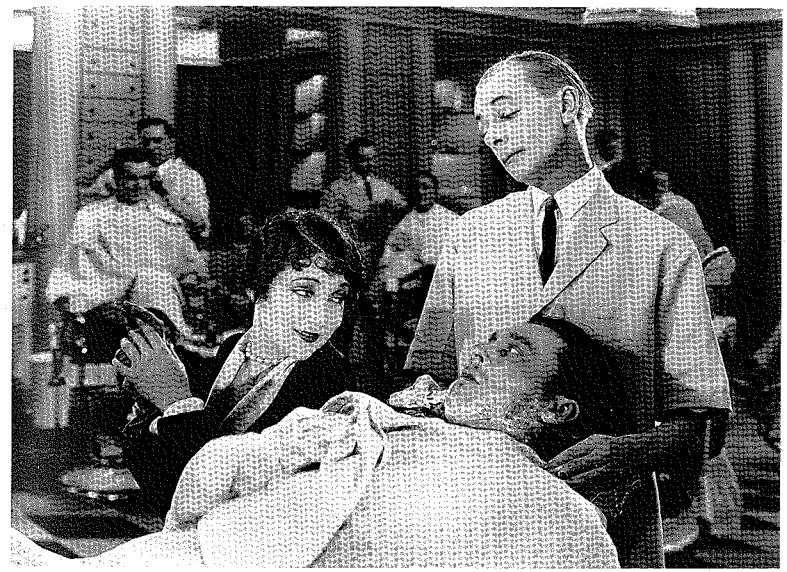
> The appeal of movies was in the details of crime and high living and wicked cities and in the language of toughs and urchins; *it was in the dirty smile of the city girl who lured the hero away from Janet Gaynor*. (104–5)

For Janet Staiger, the *femme fatale* is a figure that fundamentally bespeaks social turmoil:

The City Woman shimmies for The Man

> The character of the vamp seems almost to be merely a foil for an extensive examination of the power of sex, women's rights in this new age, and the crumbling belief in the assertion that some nineteenth-century notions of the family's behavior were still pertinent for twentieth-century America. (147–8)

But in historicising the City Woman, it is also important to see her as a 'flapper' – the archetypal metropolitan female of the 20s. Besides urbanity, the flapper represented many things to the American consciousness. For Frederick Allen, she was linked to female independence and the aftermath of suffrage: 'Women were bent on freedom – freedom to work and to play without the trammels that had bound them heretofore to live lives of comparative inactivity' (108). The flapper was also seen as hedonistic. As Higashi comments: 'The concept of fun was essential to the flapper because it determined her appearance and style' (111). Her *joie de vivre* was facilitated by the growing leisure time available to the middle classes and by 'the feasibility of life construed as a permanent weekend' (Higashi, 111). This view supports the notion of the vamp as non-productive (as



In the city, The Man visits a barber shop

opposed to the wife/mother, who engages in domestic and biological 'labour').

The vamp's hedonism was visible in her shocking mode of dress: thin, short-sleeved or sleeveless frocks, revealing skirts, silk or rayon underwear, and flesh-coloured stockings (F. Allen, 84, 103–4). Despite her heightened allure, however, she 'looked boyish and acted mannish'. To subvert conventional 'femininity', she cut her hair, slimmed down, and flattened her breasts. Furthermore, she often smoked and drank liquor (Higashi, 112).

The flapper's quest for pleasure, however, was primarily associated with sensuality – with 'petting parties' and jazz culture (Higashi, 112; F. Allen, 85). Regarding the latter, Allen notes: 'The new style of dancing was denounced in religious journals as "impure, polluting, corrupting, debasing, destroying spirituality, increasing carnality"' (92). The flapper was also a product of post-war sexual liberation, when women 'for the first time demand[ed] to live ... forbidden experiences' (Hinkle, in Kirchwey, 247). As F. Allen notes, eros was suddenly regarded as 'the central and pervasive force which moved mankind;' the 'first requirement of mental health was to have an uninhibited sex life' (98–9).

Aligned with the flapper was the 'lurid' motion picture:

> The movies themselves, drawing millions to their doors every day and every night, played incessantly upon the same lucrative theme. The producers of one picture advertised 'brilliant men, beautiful jazz babies, champagne baths, midnight revels, petting parties and purple dawn ...'; the venders of another promised ... 'pleasure-mad daughters, sensation-craving mothers'. (F. Allen, 101–2)

For Allen, the flapper's lust for life was bought at the expense of politics: 'Young men and women who a few years before would have been championing radical economic or political doctrines were championing the new morality and talking about it everywhere and thinking of it incessantly' (120).

Also lost was the nineteenth-century ideal of womanhood. As Allen comments: 'women no longer wanted to be "ladylike" or could appeal to their daughters to be "wholesome"; ... "Victorian" and "Puritan" were becoming terms of opprobrium' (Ibid 112). Similarly, for V.F. Calverton, '[t]he old sanctity of marriage [was now] ridiculed by sallies of wit and satire fired at it from every side' (12). Significantly, in

the same issue of *The Literary Digest* in which a review of *Sunrise* appears, there is an article decrying the breakdown of matrimony: 'This increase in divorce is, no doubt, in harmony with the spirit of the times' ('The Alarming Increase', 34).

These multifold issues are played out in *Sunrise*, making the Good Woman and the Bad Woman not only universal stereotypes, but figures of a particular social/historical nexus. The Woman from the City has the look of a flapper – with her bobbed hair, short chemise, clutch handbag, flowing scarf, silk stockings, cigarettes and cosmetics. It is crucial that her appearance takes time, money and effort to assemble, for as Robert L. Daniel notes, 'the flapper symbolized the new consumer economy that became conspicuous in the twenties' (56). (No wonder the City Woman wants The Man to sell his farm and bring his cash to the metropolis.) Significantly, when the farm couple goes to town and The Man stops to get a hair cut, one of the hairdressers sits The Wife down as well, and goes as if to trim her locks. In contrast to how the City Woman would react, The Wife is horrified and runs away refusing to shed her Victorian-style tresses.

The City Woman is a figure of carnality – represented by her bared legs, negligées and her ability to lure The Man into her sensual sphere. Furthermore, there could be no more apt symbol of hedonism than the image of the city that she conjures – with its prismatic vision of jazz music. The voluptuousness of this scene is later transferred directly to her person, as the rear-screen projection fades and she is seen shimmying madly in front of The Man: her gyrations reminiscent of Calverton's description of the 'wild, Corybantian antics of the flapper, flinging herself in [a] delirium of escape, night after night upon the edge of nervous ecstasy' (11).

This contrast between the vamp's sexuality and The Wife's maternity is made clear early on in the film with scenes of the lovers' embrace in the marsh intercut with shots of The Wife and child at home. In the late 20s, Margaret Sanger denounced the fate of brides (like the farm girl) who suffered from 'premature parenthood':

> She becomes a mother before she is ready to have a family. Young, full of life, entitled to develop to maturity this love and romance, many young wives ... find themselves all too soon slaves to children. ... Romance cannot live or bloom where fear and discontent thrive like weeds. (179)

46 Madonna and child

The fact that *Sunrise* begins with a montage evoking summer travel emphasises the way in which the flapper is associated with leisure – with farm vacations, and not with the work ethic of the farm (where The Wife cooks, tends her baby, and feeds the chickens). As Doane notes, the City Woman is 'either independently wealthy or at least of a higher class ... on vacation, idle' (1977: 73). As the titles tell us, 'several weeks had passed since her coming and still she lingered'.

The Wife represents the nineteenth-century feminine ideal that was becoming obsolete by the 20s (as did Anna Moore [Lillian Gish] in *Way Down East* [1920], who was contrasted to her urbane cousins, the Tremonts). Hence, perhaps, the awkward incongruity of Gaynor's wig in *Sunrise* signals how her dramatis persona is no longer viable. At the end of the couple's romantic night on the town, they sit drinking wine; the background dissolves suddenly into a tableau of hovering angels. Here, we feel that Murnau is offering us a piece of whimsical Victoriana (like a yellowed Valentine in a Joseph Cornell box) – simultaneously quaint and antiquated. On the other hand, the triumph of the wholesome woman throws doubt on the values of the vamp – a figure some have associated with European decadence. As Andrew notes:

> This film is Murnau's final death struggle with the expressionism of his early films. The expulsion of the Vamp is then a clear victory for Janet Gaynor (her hair now luxuriously undone) and the American way. (43)

OBJECTIVE/SUBJECTIVE

> The power accorded to the femme fatale is a function of fears linked to the notions of uncontrollable drives, the fading of subjectivity, and the loss of conscious agency – all themes of the emergent theories of psychoanalysis.
>
> Mary Ann Doane (1991: 2)

In addition to being a film about a woman nearly drowning, Molly Haskell finds *Sunrise* a work 'about a man losing – and regaining – his mind' (405). This is not surprising, as insanity often involves a 'plunge' to the depths of existence. Psychological themes are central to *Sunrise*,

which was made when 'Freudian gospel began to circulate to a marked extent among the American lay public' (F. Allen, 98). Significantly, the cinema played a crucial role in this dissemination. As Allen notes: 'lurid motion pictures ... had their effect on a class of readers and movie-goers who had never heard and never would hear of Freud and the libido' (100). Murnau and Mayer brought a psychic perspective to the film, influenced by German Expressionism, but, in *Sunrise*, it serves a more realistic story line than it did in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* or *Nosferatu*.

Thomas Elsaesser remarks on how Murnau 'integrated outdoor photography and natural locations into his psychological interiors' (36). The director's penchant for realism (even in a supernatural tale such as *Nosferatu*) has been noted by many critics. Molly Haskell argues that to 'call Murnau realistic is both true and false' (402). We get a sense of this tension in the marsh scene when The Man and the City Woman collect bull rushes. The first thing we notice is The Man's huge footprint in the mud, as the camera tracks along the ground. While the episode is imbued with a macabre and fantastical air, the footprint stands as a sign of concrete materiality – like the photographic image, which has traditionally served as indexical 'evidence' of the existence of phenomena in the real world.

Robin Wood sees Murnau's *œuvre* as the perfect 'blend' of two historic schools of film-making that traditionally have been counterposed. Using a conjugal metaphor appropriate to *Sunrise*, Wood states that Murnau's films represent 'the marriage of Méliès and Lumière' (Wood, 11). Whereas Méliès' style is associated with frivolous stage illusions, within the narratives of his films such tricks sometimes have psychological overtones, particularly when associated with a character's reveries (for example, *A Drunkard's Dream* [1897], *The Christmas Dream* [1900], *The Dream of a Hindu Beggar* [1902], *The Ballet-Master's Dream* [1903]). It is this sense of the psychic aura of special effects that imbues *Sunrise* – in which cinematic 'magic' is linked to the Unconscious. As Haskell notes, Murnau creates 'a dreamlike world of infinite extension' (402).

Though subjective in its focus, *Sunrise* is not concerned with the individual psyche. As Wood remarks, Murnau 'shows remarkably little of the novelist's interest in the development and interaction of individualized characters ... their depth is that of universal archetypes' (10). Thus, Murnau is concerned with the broad forces of the psyche (love, hate, lust, regret, guilt) – drives that ostensibly motivate, plague and bedevil humankind.

In certain instances, the very landscape of the film seems to reflect the characters' interior state. When The Man plods through the marshes, enveloped by fog, the *mise en scène* gives a sense of his being lost and obsessed. Similarly, the narrative's emplotment in terms of a journey (especially across dark, deep waters) signifies a psychic voyage. And when a storm erupts during the couple's boat trip home, the gale can be seen to symbolise the affective turmoil The Man has undergone.

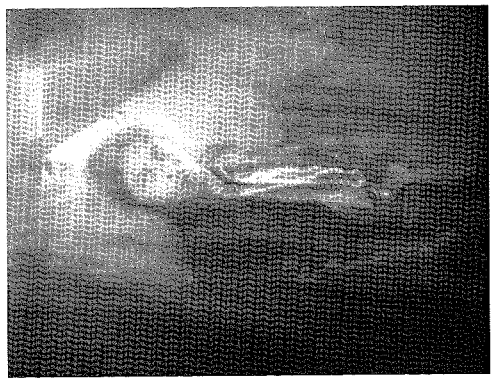
In the more 'magical' sequences, however, Murnau literally depicts a character's consciousness, in an attempt to 'photograph thought' (Murnau, 'Films of the Future', 90). Murnau boasted that critics described him as a 'mental director' (Ibid.) and indicated his interest in stream of consciousness techniques. As he stated:

> We have our thoughts and also our deeds. James Joyce, the English novelist, demonstrates this very well in his works. He first picturizes the mind and then balances it with the action. After all, the mind is the motive behind the deed.' ('The Ideal Picture', 72)

This is displayed in *Sunrise*, during the sequences in which The Man sees an enticing vision of the city (associated with his temptation), or when he imagines an image of drowning his wife (linked to his homicidal tendencies). Murnau also gains access to a character's interiority through the technique of superimposition – for example, when The Man lies in bed on the evening he first considers murder, water imagery is layered over his body. In the same scene, images of the Woman from the City are matted into the frame and matched so perfectly to his torso that she seems to embrace him – a representation of his lust. Finally, when The Man overcomes his moral struggle, and his sanity is restored, his new found peace is represented by a scene of the couple walking through an imaginary field in the midst of city traffic (Haskell, 405). Given these sequences, it is understandable that Haskell finds the tone of *Sunrise* 'hallucinatory', and the narrative a 'victory of mind over matter' (404, 406). Similarly, Fieschi calls the film 'a voyage into the imaginary' (718).

It is also significant that Murnau's subjective techniques involve a merging rather than a separation of fantasy and reality. (Perhaps that is why Elsaesser states that, 'Murnau's art ... comprised an ability to naturalise artifice' [35].) Instead of cutting away from The Man and the City Woman to a vision of the illusory metropolis, the scene is

The return voyage: a storm at sea



Water superimposed over The Man's body

The City Woman superimposed

'projected' behind the couple, in the very same space. Similarly, rather than cut away from The Man in his bed to an image of the water, Murnau makes the lake 'wash' over him. And, finally, in the urban traffic jam, the city 'becomes' the country. Mary Ann Doane finds this tension between realism and fiction evinced in the film's closing image: 'the final signature of the text is not that sun which is the most natural thing in nature but an artificial stylized sun. The distinction between the natural and the cultural (artificial) is a problem throughout the text' (1977: 76).

On the one hand, it is easy to read *Sunrise* as a rather conservative drama when viewed from a psychoanalytic perspective. For Wood, it is a tale of 'untrammeled libido and its subjugation through the order of marriage' (11). Given that Murnau was homosexual, Wood also finds (in the text's banishment of the ambiguous City Woman) an allegory for the director's rejection of his own sexual preference: 'one cannot escape the feeling that in relegating the City Woman ... to the night and the marshes, Murnau was degrading his own sexual energies, under the overwhelming weight of the dominant sexual ideology' (17). On the other hand, by subtitling *Sunrise*, 'A Song of Two Humans' (without reference to men or women), Murnau is, perhaps, hinting that romantic love is gender-neutral.

However, on another level, one could argue that the psychic trajectory traced in *Sunrise* is daring, rather than tame. For, in The Man and The Wife, we have characters who leave the constrained, sentimental world of standard melodrama and descend into the abyss of the psyche – testing the limits of human emotion, looking malevolence in the face, and, then moving on. If *Sunrise* teaches us anything, it is that love is only possible by confronting hate – that attaining spiritual heights is likely only if one has sunk to corporeal depths. Perhaps this is why Dorothy Jones argues that *Sunrise* is not a conventional morality tale. Instead, she claims, it demonstrates 'that good and evil are both part of living, that our mistakes and our suffering need not ruin us, but that what these events mean to us and what we do with them is what matters, for they may indeed become the very means by which our tomorrow may prove to be a better day' (262). That The Man must almost slay his wife in order to love her, that The Wife can confront his treachery, yet forgive him, reveals how we must face the heart of darkness in order to see the light (an image that evokes the daily cycle so crucial to the narrative of *Sunrise*).

This could be the reason why Alexander Astruc identifies Murnau's style with the act of destruction. As he cryptically writes: 'Every frame of Murnau's is the story of a murder. The camera will have the simplest and most shocking of roles: that of being the annunciating and prescient terrain of an assassination. ... The story of the sequence is the accomplishment of that promise of death' (71).

POETRY/NARRATIVE

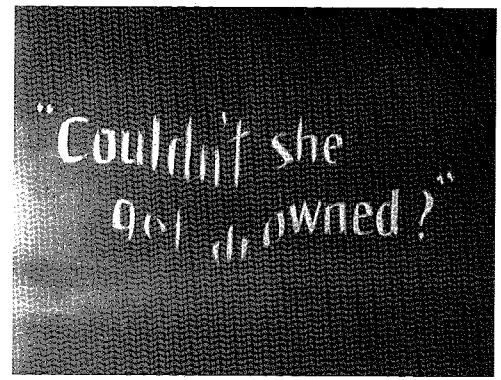
> It is very strange to me that we have a generation born and grown to manhood since the motion pictures were invented, and yet so far, no great Poet of the new art has arisen.
>
> F.W. Murnau ('Films of the Future', 27)

In perhaps a gesture of false modesty, Murnau, writing in 1928, decried the dearth of cinematic poets – though he himself was clearly a candidate for such an appellation. Decades later, in fact, Martin Scorsese called *Sunrise* a 'superproduction, an experimental film and a visionary poem' (*A Personal Journey*, Part II).

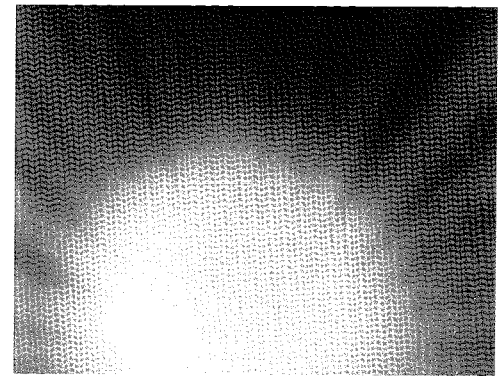
Many of the sequences in the film (read previously along the axis of subjectivity/objectivity) could just as easily be examined along the continuum of poetry and narrative. When The Man lies in bed plotting his wife's murder, and shots of the water's surface are superimposed over his body, the imagery functions as something more than a sign of his homicidal plans. Rather, it serves on a semantic level to signal that he is spiritually 'sunk'. In general, such poetic touches come at highly stylised moments in the film and tend to interrupt the flow of the narrative – substituting the layered sense of metaphor for the progressive logic of metonymy. Thus, the phantasmagoric image of the reconciled couple walking through a meadow, stops urban traffic dead in its tracks – freezing an instant of time.

Sunrise opens with a dense poetic sequence that retards the narrative before it can begin: a visual collage is introduced by the words, 'Summertime ... vacation time'. In a series of six shots, we see catalogued and conjoined (through blocking, matting, or superimposition) speeding trains, ocean liners, beach bathers, excursion boats, sailboats, and workday metropolitan streets. Already embedded in

The Man returns home from a lovers' tryst



Intertitle representing the City Woman's words



The Art Deco sunrise at the film's end

this complex discourse are sites and vehicles of importance to the upcoming drama: the city, the water, boats and trains. Already resonating are thematic oppositions central to the narrative: labour versus leisure, toil versus pleasure.

Frequently, props, intertitles and gestures in *Sunrise* take on a symbolic charge. When, during his marshland tryst with the City Woman, The Man nervously tosses away a flower, it signifies his rejection of the world of Nature (wife, country) in favour of the realm of Artifice (flapper, city). When he walks home from his rendezvous amid hanging fish nets, the decor functions not only as realistic detail but as a sign of his entrapment. When an intertitle ('spoken' by the City Woman) asks The Man, 'Couldn't [your wife] get drowned?' – the words themselves 'sink' on the screen, descending like lines of concrete poetry. Finally, when the hollow bull rushes (which The Man has tied to his wife) drift away from her and float on the water's surface, we are reminded of the inevitable rise (or return) of the repressed – the very Desire which has led him to contemplate murder in the first place.

STASIS/MOVEMENT

> The feeling for the expressive force of movement is perhaps the essence of Murnau's art. Robin Wood (12)

One of the reasons that Murnau was summoned to Hollywood was the aesthetic triumph of his virtuosic camera movement in *Der Letzte Mann* (*The Last Laugh*). Such extraordinary flourishes (which went beyond the expository requirements of narrative) were a sign of the film's status as a 'work of art.' Murnau brought the same sensibility to *Sunrise*, and some of its most beloved sequences involve a delicate balance between stasis and motion.

As in *Der Letzte Mann*, some of the movement in *Sunrise* is produced by the camera (to which a *Photoplay* critic wittily assigned a 'best performance of the month' award [Lipkin, 361]). For The Man's infamous walk through the marshes, a camera was mounted on a ceiling track (Desilets, 15) and executed a complex choreography that followed and lost him (happening on the City Woman and two artificial moons in

the process). What is especially of note is the friction created between the camera's relentless advance and The Man's heavy, lumbering gait, which seems to frustrate any sense of progress. A similar tension is apparent in the couple's sailing trip to town. Up until the point when The Man attempts to murder his wife, his movements are slow and ponderous; it's as though his body is fighting his dreadful intent. But when his wife comprehends his murderous goal, the action freezes – becoming a virtual tableau of horror and terror. Then, when he abandons his heinous plans, the pace radically quickens as the boat plows swiftly through the water. The segment ends in a flurry of animation: The Wife runs from the boat to the shore, The Man desperately chasing after her. This scene is followed by one of the most memorable instances of camera movement in the film – the trolley ride from country to town. Again, it is the contrast between the flowing motion of the camera (mounted on the vehicle) and the stilted, leaden quality of the couple's rapport which gives the scene resonance. As Wood comments: 'the feeling of forward movement counterpoint[s] the ... quasi-paralyzed attitudes of the man and the wife' (14). In these various episodes, stasis signifies distress and movement implies freedom, but the two poles are given an opposite valence elsewhere. When the couple is finally reunited in the city, they calmly dine together then peacefully sail home on a mirrored lake. Here, it is the brisk and furious wind that embodies movement and now it is associated with danger.

In addition to subverting movement through the stationary blocking of actors, Murnau also uses other pictorial techniques. As Eisner remarks: 'Sometimes the art-historian in Murnau chose to arrange the objects in a shot like a painter composing a still life' (74). As evidence of this, one critic who reviewed *Sunrise* made the observation that 'Many of th[e] shots have the art value of etchings' ('*Sunrise*', Oct 1927). Another writer compared *Sunrise* to 'Dutch genre painting' (Glassgold, 283). But, as Wood remarks, 'any sense we may have of Murnau as a dramatic portrait-painter is very quickly qualified by our sense of movement in his films' (12).

While, on one level, the issue of stasis versus action can be read in purely formal terms, on another it invokes the broader question of essentialism versus historicity. In several reviews, critics use terms like 'universal' or 'archetypal' to refer to Murnau's work – epithets which are associated with timelessness. Petrie states, explicitly, the view that

Murnau was 'never particularly interested in exploring the economic or social contexts within which the human dramas of his stories took place' (43). Similarly, Robert Herring accuses *Sunrise* of being irrelevant: 'The cinema should be the means of this age to express what this age feels and there is nothing of this age in *Sunrise*' (44).

In one sense, we have already countered this theory by contextualising the iconic Woman from the City as a flapper of the 1920s. Also, her status as a figure of erotic trespass (adulteress or same-sex partner) links her to the influence of Weimar culture, with its 'fascination with sexual transgression and the violation of traditional taboos through the exploration of pornography, prostitution, androgyny, [and] homosexuality' (Doane, 1991: 142–3). Similarly, Allen and Gomery's discussion of Murnau and the German film 'invasion' lends added historical weight to the text. Finally, Doane points out how The Man's adulterous liaison is firmly rooted within the economic order. Thus, the couple's past happiness (rendered in flashback) is associated with the man's physical labour; he must then 'relinquish his material possessions in order to possess the object of desire' (1977: 72–3).

Significantly, when *Sunrise* premiered in New York on 23 September 1927 at the Times Square Theatre, it shared the bill with two Movietone newsreels – one of which was *The Man of the Hour*, a documentary about Benito Mussolini (Desilets, 40). The documentary's European setting invoked the continental background of *Sunrise*, but it also brought political reality directly into the realm of the film in a manner which emphasised the trajectory 'From *Caligari* to Hitler'. Critic Kenneth White described the documentary as showing: 'Fascist soldiers on horseback [who] deployed and shouted and clomped – clomped – endlessly over paving stones for very attentive and astonished eyes' (582).

Hence, as though vulnerable to permeable borders, the circumstances of *Sunrise*'s exhibition allowed the social world to infiltrate the abstract universe of the film.

PAINTING/CINEMA

> Painting is a thundering collision of different worlds, intended to create a new world in, and from, the struggle with one another. ... Each work originates just as does the cosmos – through catastrophes which out of the chaotic din of instruments ultimately create a symphony, the music of the spheres.
>
> Wassily Kandinsky (quoted in Herbert, 35)

I have cited critics who have compared Murnau's *mise en scène* to still life compositions, and noted the influence of Expressionism on his work. But the most important connection between his films and art history has not yet been broached and seems to be absent from the critical literature.[3] To pursue the issue, we must recall that the director was born Friedrich Plumpe and took the name Murnau after a Bavarian town associated with the famous Blaue Reiter (Blue Rider) movement in Germany of the early 1900s – a fact that the art student Plumpe would surely have known. One version of the story claims that Plumpe took an alias to hide his acting career from his parents (Wakeman, 807) – but whether or not this is true, his particular choice of name seems significant.

The driving force behind the Blaue Reiter group was a Russian émigré to Munich – Wassily Kandinsky – who drew around him such painters as Gabriele Munter, Alexei von Jawlensky, August Macke, Franz Marc, Marianne von Werefkin and Paul Klee. Not formally a 'movement' (in the sense of Futurism or Surrealism), the Blaue Reiter group formed a loose affiliation to work together on the publication of an *Almanac* (in 1912) and on two major exhibitions. None the less, the artists shared a certain philosophy of creation and saw themselves as prime movers in the international drive toward modernism.

According to art historian Hans K. Roethel, the hamlet of Murnau was 'an oversized village and not quite a town, situated on the Staffelsee, one of those attractive lakes between Munich and the Alps' (7). The connection between the artists and the town arose when Kandinsky and Munter first visited in 1904, and decided to spend a summer there in 1908. They were joined by Jawlensky and von Werefkin (Vezin and Vezin, 65). Kandinsky and Munter acquired a house in Murnau in 1909 (Roethel, 20) and it became their home base – the 'second mythical town of Kandinsky's inner cosmology after Moscow' (Vezin and Vezin, 65). Several of the Blaue Reiter artists painted scenes of Murnau – a village (situated by a lake) not unlike the fictional one in *Sunrise*. One painting which comes to mind is Munter's *View of the Murnau Marsh* (1908), evocative of the site of the lovers' tryst in *Sunrise*; another is Kandinsky's *Railroad in Murnau* (1909), which is reminiscent of the

farm couple's trip from the village to the city. Finally, Jawlensky's *Summer Evening in Murnau* (1908–9), which depicts a vibrant sunset.

In addition to the obvious associations with the landscape, some of the theories propounded by the group seem relevant to Murnau's work. As the quote from Kandinsky's 'Reminiscences' (1913) reveals, the artist saw creation in terms of merged oppositions – which is precisely the notion we have privileged in examining Murnau's work. Primary among such 'border crossings' was the blurring of lines between abstraction and realism, which Kandinsky saw as 'two paths which lead in the end to one and same goal' (quoted in Roethel, 69). Significantly, this tendency is also found in *Sunrise*. Kandinsky's quote also reveals his interest in musical form – not dissimilar to the structure of *Sunrise*, which Murnau deemed a 'song.' Interestingly, one of the artists associated with the group was the painter/composer Arnold Schoenberg.

According to Annette and Luc Vezin, the Blaue Reiter group imagined a 'universal' art that was characterised by 'neither nationality, nor frontiers, but simply humanity' (9). This philosophy fits with Murnau's titling of *Sunrise* as 'a song of two humans'. The Blaue Reiter artists were fascinated with folklore (a direction encouraged by Munter [Zweite, 21]). In particular, Kandinsky was intrigued by Bavarian glass paintings (*hunterglasbilder*) which made objects represented on the surface appear almost melted or liquefied (Vezin and Vezin, 74). According to Armin Zweite, 'Precisely this phenomenon – the dissolution of the concrete and the superimposition of different layers of reality – was the problem with which Kandinsky was grappling in his own painting at this time' (21–2). Again, both the appeal of folk art (like the peasant dance in *Sunrise*) and the notion of images 'dissolved' and 'superimposed' have resonant implications in relation to the visual style of Murnau's film.

While the modernist urban scene that appears in the opening of *Sunrise* is not directly associated with Blaue Reiter iconography, it is tied to one of the painters they championed – Robert Delaunay, a figure honoured by an article in *The Blue Rider Almanac*. Two of Delaunay's paintings which evoke *Sunrise* are *Champ de Mars, The Red Tower* (1911), with its fractured Eiffel Tower and superimposed buildings; and *The Window on the City* (1912), a picture which accompanied the essay on Delaunay in the *Almanac*.

The final connection has to do with the 'spirituality' one senses in *Sunrise*; a spirituality which is omnipresent in Blaue Reiter philosophy.

As Kandinsky wrote: 'The Art of today ... enshrines ... the spirituality that is ripe to the point of revelation' (quoted in Roethel, 69).

CLASSICAL/MODERNIST

> Critics are inclined to belittle them and call them cheap. But [critics] don't seem to sense the idea that life is made up largely of melodrama.
>
> Franz Borzage (quoted in Wakeman, 46)

The Movietone newsreel shown at the New York premiere of *Sunrise* was not the only contemporaneous Fox production to share screen or publicity space with Murnau's film. In the same year that *Sunrise* was made and on the same studio back lot, the American director Frank Borzage (1893–1962) shot *Seventh Heaven* (1927), also starring Janet Gaynor. Borzage, in fact, received the first Academy Award for Directing for the film and Gaynor was awarded the Academy's Best Actress honour for her cumulative work on *Sunrise*, *Seventh Heaven* and *Street Angel* (1928). Gaynor went on to make around thirty-six films for Fox, including *Daddy Long Legs* (1931), *Delicious* (1931), *State Fair* (1933), *Paddy the Next Best Thing* (1933) and *The Farmer Takes a Wife* (1935). Tired of being typecast by Fox in roles designed to show her 'innocence, vulnerability and sweetness' (Bird, 30), Gaynor left the studio in 1937 after having been invited by David O. Selznick to appear in *A Star is Born*. By drawing on the historical and metonymic proximity between *Sunrise* and *Seventh Heaven* – as well as on their shared female star – we can place the films within a comparative frame, thereby foregrounding the parallels and differences between Murnau's movie and the more conventional genre product of *Seventh Heaven*.

In *Sunrise* the setting is ambiguous, drifting between Europe and the States; *Seventh Heaven* (stylistically a more 'American' film) is, ironically, set plainly in the slums of Paris in Montmartre. The precise chronological moment is left vague in *Sunrise* (the town seems to be based in the eighteenth century while the city is marked by the 1920s); *Seventh Heaven* is, however, firmly set in the years leading up to World War I. Whereas the moral universe of *Sunrise* is dubious (The Man is both sympathetic and dastardly, and The City Woman is equally alluring

and pernicious), the characters in *Seventh Heaven* are either good or evil. The 'good' characters include: Diane (Gaynor), a poor waif who is preyed on by her drunken, sadistic sister, Nana (Gladys Brockwell); Chico (Charles Farrell), a kindly street cleaner who takes Diane in when she is homeless; Père Chevillion (Emile Chautard), a genial priest; and some friendly neighbours. Neither Diane nor Chico show a 'dark' side comparable to that of Murnau's farmer: Diane is portrayed as saintly, and the only struggle in which Chico engages is the one to realise his love for Diane. In this respect, the film, though melodramatic in tone, adopts the style of a romantic comedy, whereby one lover (who is initially resistant) must be won over by the other (who is immediately smitten) – though the conclusion is never in doubt.

As is often the case with conventional melodrama which tends to focus on female victimhood and virginity (D.W. Griffith's films being a prime example), *Seventh Heaven* sidesteps the erotic. (As Jean-Pierre Coursodon wrote: 'much of [Borzage's] creative energy was channeled toward devising ways of making sexual fulfillment difficult, impossible, or unthinkable for his protagonists' [Wakeman, 43].) Although Chico and Diane become enamoured of each other, their affection seems

Janet Gaynor in *Seventh Heaven* (1927)

passionless and domestic: he grows to love her primarily for her ability to sew, cook and adjust his cummerbund. The film avoids the disturbing erotic thrust of *Sunrise*, making the crimes of its villainess (Nana) ones of cruelty and addiction rather than seduction. The film's one and only sexually charged moment happens when Chico passes on the stairs a partially clad woman who is standing suggestively in the doorway to her flat. He continues on his way. Had he not, he might have found himself in the dangerous realm of *Sunrise*.

In keeping with its high moral tone, *Seventh Heaven* has both a patriotic and religious bias, something which *Sunrise* lacks. Chico happily goes off to fight for France in the war, and tells his neighbours: 'We must defend our homes and our women.' Murnau, though a former military pilot, was a pacifist. If he had any interest in making a war film, it was not to 'treat ... the glorification of gore and wholesale slaughter, but rather [to] disclos[e] its perniciousness ... convincing people of the utter futility of physical combat' (Murnau, 'The Ideal Picture', 41).

A religious theme is, of course, implicit in the title of *Seventh Heaven*, a reference to celestial spheres and to the rewards of good earthly behaviour. Throughout, Chico talks of his relationship to the 'Bon Dieu'. Père Chevillion is a stand-in for the Maker; he intervenes in the lives of Chico and Diane as proof that 'God's in his heaven, and all's right with the world'.

The symbolism of the title permeates the drama on various registers. It's a reference to Chico's seventh floor residence, to which the couple climbs when Diane first moves in (he tells her: 'I work in the sewer but live near the stars'). The story also charts Chico's professional rise from underground worker to street sweeper, another ascendancy on the high/low scale of existence that rewards those who are virtuous and who persevere. Finally, at the end of the film, a suspenseful moment is created by an association between the couple's attic love nest and the afterlife. Chico is reported killed in action, but he surprises Diane by suddenly returning to their apartment – blind but alive, filled with divine vision. The film closes on a shot showing a shaft of sunlight striking the floor, symbolic of the couple's rekindling of their faith and love.

While *Sunrise* plays on metaphors of light and dark, day and night, the sun and the moon, it relieves them of their religious overtones (which are implicit in Sudermann's short story), and draws on a more primal and natural iconography. Though Murnau's Man and Wife are

'remarried' in a church, it is less a religious act than a psychic and metaphysical encounter. If Chico moves from the sewer to the stars, The Man seems forever stuck in the marsh. But it is its moral 'pollution' that makes *Sunrise* so intriguing. As Pauline Kael has written (in regard to cinema in general), 'What draws us to movies in the first place, the opening into other, forbidden or surprising, kinds of experience, and the vitality and corruption and irreverence of that experience are so direct and immediate and have so little connection with what we have been taught is art' (105).

Similar to its narrative, the style of *Seventh Heaven* is more conventional than that of *Sunrise*. With the exception of the *tour de force* sequence in which the couple first climbs their 'stairway to heaven' (and the escalating camera reveals, through a missing fourth wall, their ascent), Borzage uses fairly standard camera positions and movements, as well as established *mise en scène* (for example, a low angle when Diane is beaten by her sister; a travelling shot as Diane runs out into the street; realistic painted backdrops of Paris). This is in marked contrast to the modernist, visual excesses of *Sunrise*, whose technique many critics faulted for 'overwhelm[ing] a basically impoverished story, resulting in confusing and pointless overstatement' (Lipkin, 360).

Seventh Heaven, however, was described in very different terms, ones which were tinged by gritty American imagery and slang. *Variety* called it 'a big romantic, gripping and red-blooded story told in a straight to the shoulder way'. Not surprisingly, the reviewer saw Borzage's style as liberating the film's wholesome emotional potential: 'when the last foot of some 11,000 or so feet is unwound, if there is a dry eyelash on either man, woman or child, they just have no red blood' ('7th Heaven').

Far more complex and ambivalent was the critical and spectatorial response to *Sunrise*, a film which – to draw on metaphors of blood and bloodlessness – casts the threat to God and the Family in perverse, female, vampiristic terms.

SURVEYOR/SURVEYED

> Murnau's cinema, [is] so much ... about mediated desire, desire of an image for an image: the open secret of film-making itself, intensely eroticising the very act of looking, but also every object looked at by a camera.
>
> Thomas Elsaesser (39)

It should be clear that *Sunrise* is a highly self-conscious text which invokes both the cinema and the act of spectatorship upon which the medium thrives. Some examples of this have already been noted, in particular, the ersatz 'movie' that The Man and the City Woman 'watch' during their rendezvous in the marshes. This is what Elsaesser surely means when he writes of Murnau's work as involving 'mediated desire' or the 'desire of an image for an image'. Doane agrees, finding that the 'desire of the text is to remove desire from direct sensory experience' – presumably, to the realm of art (1977: 74). For this reason, vision and the gaze are central to the discourse of *Sunrise*. Sensing this, Louise Bogan, writing poetically in 1927, sees Murnau's camera as 'an eye for motion-beside-within-motion, a retina reflecting an intricately flowing world. ...[It] moves as the eye and the eye, with the camera, makes journeys' (408).

Clearly, the theme of vision is pivotal to the narrative. When the Woman from the City lusts after The Man, she walks to his cottage and

The Wife tends to her adulterous husband

peers through his window, thus occupying the traditional position of the male voyeur. Significantly, The Man's gaze is not highly active or sexual. Apparently more tortured by the City Woman than aroused, he barely looks at her. At other times, his gaze seems equally impotent, as, for instance, when he stares piteously at his wife as she feeds the chickens. She later returns his pathetic gaze, regarding him asleep in bed after his tryst with his lover. This choreography of looks reaches a crescendo when the couple ventures to town, and their relation is charted according to who stares and who averts their eyes.

But there are other scenes within the film that have a resonant relation to the film medium. It's significant that as part of their night on the town the couple visits Luna Park – a site whose name not only continues the sun and the moon metaphor of the film – but which invokes a locale central to the prehistory of cinema, the amusement park.[4] Films were first exhibited in amusement parks, and it was at these venues that what Tom Gunning calls the early 'cinema of attractions' was formulated. Like the lines of people crushing to get into Luna Park in *Sunrise*, crowds eventually queued up for the movies.

The amusement park in *Sunrise*, like the city in which it is located, seems European. In its visual configuration, the park is reminiscent of the sideshow setting of *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. And in an Expressionistic touch, shadows of the funfair crowd are seen silhouetted on a wall.

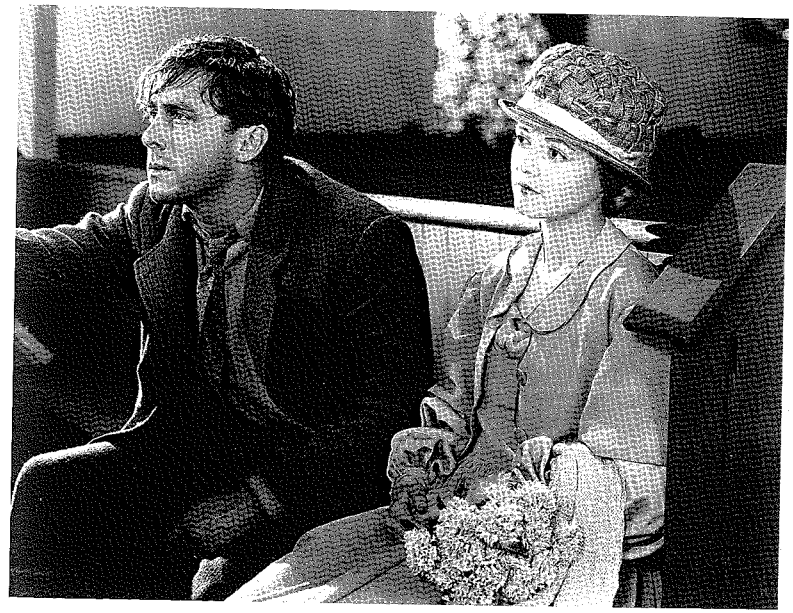
There is another episode which happens in the city that is relevant to themes of vision and the cinema: the church scene. The couple, having struggled with the recognition of infidelity and violence, is finally reunited, and they walk dazedly through town. As they embrace, bells are heard, and a church comes into view with a wedding in progress. The couple exchange poignant glances and head toward the chapel. Once inside, they become the *spectators*; as they watch, the minister asks the groom whether he will protect his bride from harm. Touched, The Man says 'yes' (in unison with the groom), and then falls sobbing into his wife's lap.

What is shown here is a demonstration of the power of spectatorship – the very kind on which *Sunrise* depends – an acknowledgment of the capacity of drama to force the viewer to identify with its personae and to be moved to catharsis. It is as if the farm couple

take the place of the cinema audience as they in turn watch a bride and groom who are substitutes for themselves. As Dudley Andrew states: 'The film here signals the mode of response it demands from us, signals itself as ritual, the very observing of which has the power to liberate the viewer' (51).

Given the self-referentiality of this scene, it is not surprising that, on leaving the church, the couple pass a window of a photography studio in which marital portraits are displayed. To seal their symbolic reunion, they decide to have their picture taken, and, through the technician's production of a print, become spectators of their own existence, as we have been of theirs. Their picture is taken against a *faux* arbour background (not unlike a film set) and we are privy to the photographer's view of the couple's inverted image as seen through the lens – a clear sign of its artifice.

Here, we have a concise and brilliant emblem of what marks *Sunrise*, that is the 'victory' of 'film over reality' (Haskell, 406). In Molly Haskell's words, *Sunrise* serves 'as a definition of the cinema' itself (404).



The Man and The Wife in church watch a wedding

LOST/FOUND

> The effect of elevated language upon an audience is not persuasion but *transport*. At every time and in every way imposing speech, with the *spell* it throws over us, prevails over that which aims at persuasion and gratification. Our persuasions we can usually control, but the influences of the sublime bring power and *irresistible might* to bear.
>
> Longinus (Smith and Parks, 65; my italics)

At its most profound and basic level, *Sunrise* is a drama of the 'Lost and Found'. Even the title refers to the return of the sun after its nightly disappearance. This dynamic of the lost and the found applies to The Man's love for his wife, as it does to hers for him. It pertains, as well, to the City Woman's loss of The Man's affections and to her bereft status at the end of the tale. Finally, it relates to the apparent death of The Wife, who is ultimately found alive. While on the surface the story is one of quotidian melodrama, beneath it reveals more momentous implications. For although the film is devoid of religious pontificating, the narrative has an almost biblical sense of Paradise Lost and Regained, complete with the banishment of the Devil. Aptly, Collier refers to its denouement as restoring the farm couple's 'edenic state' of existence (107).

Beyond the drama of domestic romance, there are other levels at which the tension between lost and found reverberates, and these are linked to the folk elements within the film. Here, it is worth considering Mark Sandberg's research on the European folk museum, an institution which developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Sandberg remarks:

> folk museums were founded in order to preserve a concentrated, frozen, tableau-like image of traditional culture at the very moment that culture seemed most threatened by [the] changing conditions [of] ... modernity. ... The function of these national ethnographic collections ... seems ... primarily nostalgic, prompted by a longing for simpler, more coherent cultural forms in a time of rapid urbanization, industrialization and commodification. (320–1)

It is this sense that shadows the folk dance and pig-chasing scene in *Sunrise*, as it does the Lake Arrowhead set, which bears a resemblance to one of Europe's reconstructed open-air folk museums. Interestingly, Sandberg notes that in Copenhagen, the director of the city's amusement park, Tivoli, was the same man who founded the folk museum, an edifice which eventually occupied a place across the boulevard from the park (322). In *Sunrise* elements of the 'folk museum' literally enter the fair ground – as though engaging both sides of the cultural street – city and country, tradition and modernity.

In this light, one might read The Man's ambivalence about leaving his wife for the City Woman as an emblem of early modernity's equivocation about the Old and the New. Hence, it seems no accident that, when The Man saves his spouse from drowning in the storm, he does so with bull rushes, a symbol of the agrarian realm. Perhaps he has also chosen to save (not murder) the Past; to let it 'float' to the surface of the Present and Future. Interestingly, one of Marshall Berman's first characterisations of the modern experience is to liken it to drowning, to being 'poured' into a 'maelstrom' (15).

Luna Park

A dynamic of absence and restitution is also inscribed in the style of *Sunrise*. What is especially compelling about the famous scene of The Man and City Woman in the marshes is the way in which the camera 'loses' him temporarily, only to 'find' him again (after, unexpectedly, 'finding' his lover). Here, what is 'found' is suspect, since she is not the object The Man truly seeks. Perhaps this mistrust is registered in the scene's dual and counterfeit prop moons, which, uncannily, hang in two locations at the same time (like the twin sites of The Man's fickle ardour).

The notion of the lost and found can also apply to the spectatorial response to *Sunrise* which has, historically, traced a waxing and waning of regard for the film (like that of The Man for his wife). At the time of its release, the film was hotly debated. The most acerbic review was by Robert Herring in *Close Up* – a British journal that favoured experimental filmwork. Sardonically titled 'Synthetic Dawn', the piece lambastes Murnau's manufactured artiness, criticising its 'damn technique' (44). Throughout the essay, Herring assumes a superior stance, and represents the film's narrative as hopelessly obvious: 'The Man is with the Woman. All very fundamental' (39). Furthermore, he finds the film shallow: 'Trying as it sets out to do to be of no place and

Folk characters at the film's end

every place, of all time and no time, it succeeds quite elaborately in repeating the superficialities of every age while giving expression to none of the complexities of this' (45).

Herring's patronising tone recalls Marlene Dietrich in Maximilian Schell's documentary *Marlene* (1983). In the film, Schell reminds the actress of her performances in *The Blue Angel*, *Blonde Venus*, *The Scarlet Empress* and *The Devil is a Woman* and each time she repeats the same words: 'kitsch' and 'kvatsch' (rubbish). Rather than believe her epithets, however, we sense that the memory of her past success haunts her, and fills her with such pain that she must defend against it through disparagement. Perhaps, she also fears that critical standards have changed: what was once accepted as poignant may now be viewed as camp. So in maligning her legacy, she beats others to the punch: she defames her reputation before she loses it.

Curiously, the fate of *Sunrise* has been otherwise. Although at the time a reviewer like Herring might dismiss it as ridiculous (though most did not), in later years (after a period of disregard) it has achieved canonical status. In 1967 *Cahiers du cinéma* named it 'the single greatest masterwork in the history of the cinema'; in 1972 a *Sight and Sound* poll placed it as one of best twenty films of all time (Allen and Gomery, 91); and in 1974 the French journal *L'Avant-scène* devoted an entire issue to it. More recently, Dudley Andrew described it as a 'cultural monument' (57).

Yet, in the current critical climate of *post*-modernity (with its emphasis on the socio-political, its impatience with psychoanalysis, its boredom with the bourgeois individual, its resistance to pure aestheticism), *Sunrise* risks becoming lost again – or, at best, neglected. It is a testament to the strength of the work (to its 'irresistible might') that it refuses to disappear.

To consider why this is the case, we must return to a statement made by Astruc, who described Murnau's style as involving 'murder', and 'assassination'. I would argue that what *Sunrise* annihilates is the viewer's cynicism – the tendency (as a demonstration of high 'cultivation') to see it as dated, outré, or crassly 'fundamental'. Curiously, although Herring was highly critical of *Sunrise*, he did reveal certain insights. Of the film's alleged irrelevance, he made the comment that it 'takes us back and makes us unlearn' (44).

If *Sunrise* causes us to regress, it is to our more innocent selves. Thus, it makes us lose our scepticism regarding the 'banalities' of human

existence, and the potential for art to move us. (We should recall here that in *Sunrise* the couple's happiness is represented as a time when they behaved 'like children'.) What *Sunrise* forces us to 'unlearn' is approximately seventy years of cinema – a history that has, perhaps, hardened us to emotion and inured our guileless response. As Fieschi states, *Sunrise* represents a tradition in which the 'sentimental ... virus ... dominate[s]' (717). It is to this 'contagion' that we succumb.

And it is this surrender of which Longinus speaks in his arcane treatise 'On the Sublime', a critical text that few recent films would prompt us to consider. In resuscitating the piece for a reading of *Sunrise*, it seems significant that the second Movietone newsreel with which *Sunrise* premiered was titled *70 Sublime Voices*, featuring the Vatican Choir.

In his essay, Longinus writes of the aesthetic phenomenon of 'transport', of art's casting a 'spell' over the audience. It is such a reaction that *Sunrise* solicits. If Molly Haskell is correct in her reading of the narrative, in that it concerns a man losing and regaining his mind, the same might be said of the spectator, who expends but retrieves a certain affective power and vulnerability. Interestingly, the audience's rapture seems prefigured in Sudermann's story. When Ansas and Indra visit Tilsit, and circulate among its Teutonic residents, they listen to a concert of *Die Post in Walde*. Indra is overwhelmed by the music – no doubt, in part, because it allows her to vent her repressed anguish toward her mate. She reacts to the performance in the following way:

> Even in your dreams you could never imagine anything so beautiful on earth. ... Listening to it, you forgot that you were human. And in order that these strange Germans sitting about might not see how deeply she was affected she sprang up quickly, hastened through the crowd and around the bandstand, past some tables to a spot beyond the trees where it was quiet and only empty benches stood. There she sat down, raised her new veil from her eyes to keep it from getting wet, and cried, – cried from the very bottom of her heart. (Sudermann, 34–5)

It is such a 'veil' that *Sunrise* forces us to raise as it simultaneously directs us to cross several borders – those between love and hate (for the film's force and platitudes), and those between sophistication and naivety (in our response).

The word 'sublime' derives from the Latin 'limen', which signifies a 'threshold' or 'boundary', further indicating how *Sunrise* is a 'limenal' work. The term also relates to the verb 'sublimate' which means to 'modify the natural expression of an instinctual impulse in a socially acceptable manner' – just what the embarrassed Indra does among the German residents of Tilsit (Morris, 1282).

While society quashes our hopes for a world in which good can derive from evil, or love can flourish in acute distress, *Sunrise* forbids such sublimation in the name of the sublime. It is precisely this prohibition that French critic Jean Domarchi highlights when he states: 'What strikes the spectator most [about *Sunrise*] is the perfection with which Murnau accommodates prosaic themes in his expression of the sublime' (quoted in '*L'Aurore*', p. 5; my translation).

NOTES

1 See also Jean-André Fieschi (718), and Molly Haskell (405) for similar characterisations of *Sunrise* in terms of notions of dialectics or oppositions.

2 This programme is in the files of the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The image is reproduced in '*L'Aurore*' (41).

3 It is absent, at least, from the English-language critical literature.

4 There were amusement parks named Luna Park in a variety of cities, so that it almost became a generic name. Michael Aronson's research into early cinema venues in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania reveals that there was a park with that name there during the first part of the 1900s and up until the 20s. There was also one in Coney Island (New York).

CREDITS

Sunrise
A Song of Two Humans

USA
1927
Production Company
Fox Film Corporation
A William Fox Presentation
Producer
William Fox
Studio Head
Winfield R. Sheehan
Director
F.W. Murnau
Assistant Director
Herman Bing
Scenario
Carl Mayer
based on the novel *Die Reise nach Tilsit* by Hermann Sudermann
Titles
Katherine Hilliker, H.H. Caldwell
Comedy Consultant
William Conselman
Directors of Photography
Charles Rosher, Karl Struss
Assistant Cameramen
Stuart Thompson, Hal Carney
Stills
Frank Powolny
Special Effects
Frank D. Williams
Editor
Harold Schuster
Art Director
Rochus Gliese
Art Department
Gordon Wiles
Assistant Art Directors
Edgar G. Ulmer, Alfred Metscher
Make-up
Charles Dudley
Musical Score
Hugo Riesenfeld
Musical Score for Los Angeles Premiere
Carli Elinor

George O'Brien
the man
Janet Gaynor
the wife
Margaret Livingston
the woman from the city
Bodil Rosing
the maid
J. Farrell MacDonald
the photographer
Ralph Sipperly
the hairdresser
Jane Winton
the manicure girl
Arthur Housman
the obtrusive gentleman
Eddie Boland
the obliging gentleman
and uncredited
Gino Corrado
barbershop manager
Gibson Gowland
angry driver
Sidney Bracy
dancehall manager
Phillips Smalley
head waiter
Barry Norton
dancer
F.W. Murnau
vacationer on boat
Sally Eilers
Herman Bing
Bob Kortman
Robert Parrish
Leo White
extras

Credits compiled by Markku Salmi.

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